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ABSTRACT

Intended for teachers in Tasmania, this booklet focuses on guidelines for developing a language program for young children. Chapters are entitled: How Language Competence Grows; Language, Thought and Feelings Are Independent; The Child's Language Development Depends on Our Responses; and Growth of Understanding. The philosophy presented in the booklet is based on widely accepted thinking, practice, and research about language over the past 20 years. The booklet stresses the importance of teachers' understanding the theory behind language acquisition, and its relevance to day-to-day practice, so that a consistent approach can be developed. Several black and white photographs illustrate the text. (MG)

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Children and Language

CS 212 616

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Education Department, Tasmania

'Self-discovery is the most important
of all human discoveries.'

C. Day-Lewis

'Two things are perhaps surprising
about the skills and knowledge that a child brings with him when he is about
to learn to read: the sheer quantity and complexity of his ability
and the small credit that he is usually given.'

Smith, 1971
New Directions for Reading Teaching,
ed. David B. Doake and Brian T. O'Rourke, p.30

'The influence of the reading tastes and habits
formed in childhood may last a lifetime.'

John G. Freeman
in *Directions for Reading Teaching*

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before and are able to produce sentences they have not heard at all.

In reaching this stage children use imitation in part, but only in part. Very early on, they become capable of receiving and constructing sentences they have not heard before. For this they depend upon their powers to tacitly formulate and apply rules. As they progress towards mastery of the language structures of their community, children use three linguistic systems simultaneously.

They imitate the phonological system used by those around them and this enables them to make words from the basic sounds of the language; they construct grammatical systems by means of which they combine words to form increasingly varied and complex sentences; they develop a semantic system which gives them increasing power to use words and sentences to convey meaning and to interact with the world.

What is at first an intuitive knowledge of these systems develops only gradually into a conscious awareness. Active discoveries of these things are constantly being made by children as they play with rhymes, riddles, jokes and the like and as they are introduced to our literature in its many varieties of story, verse, drama and information.

Young children acquire their early language in daily experience, in contexts which have meaning for them. They continue to develop in the use of language through the need to learn what life is all about. *Entering school does not make a child a different kind of being who learns in a different way.*

Children and Language

DEVELOPING A LANGUAGE PROGRAM

Education Department, Tasmania

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FOREWORD

Any statement on a topic as vast as language must necessarily be incomplete and remain open to review and development. The philosophy presented in these guidelines is based on widely accepted thinking, practice and research about language over the past twenty years.

Without a developing philosophy we are likely to go with the winds – or whims – of educational fashion; for example, we may find 'formal grammar' is coming in, and 'creative writing' is suspect, or that in five years' time 'creative writing' may reappear and 'formal grammar' may be out. Swings of fashion will continue to occur unless our theory and practice is informed by sound research and a thorough understanding of language development and of the place of language in human life.

It is important that teachers understand the theory behind language acquisition, and its relevance to day to day practice, so that a consistent approach can be developed.

The task of producing these guidelines was a complex and demanding one and the outcome is indicative of the fine professional commitment of those who have unselfishly given of their time in the process.

To all those concerned I express deep appreciation of the ready co-operation and unstinted effort in fulfilling a task of very considerable importance to the children of Tasmania.

KENNETH AXTON

Director of Primary Education

1 Introduction

Language is an ordered system of symbols and sounds by which we think, articulate, communicate, record, recall and project meaning, both for ourselves and for others.

> Human beings are essentially symbol-using animals. They make their own representation of the events and objects that they have encountered. By this symbolising they carry in their mind the world as they have known it. They can see the present in the light of the past; using both, they can construct the future.
>
> – *Bullock 1975*

In the midst of the debate about the relationship between language and thought it is generally agreed that competence in using a wide range of language forms facilitates higher levels of thinking. Given its primary role in our thinking lives, the development of the child's language is logically the principal aim of the school. It underlines all activities, both planned and unplanned. It involves **talking, listening, moving, making, thinking, valuing, imagining, remembering,** as well as **reading, writing, recording.**

Children should have the opportunity to be involved in all these activities in the primary school. Exploration, experience, discovery and problem-solving are all avenues for learning. In all of these activities *the teacher's response is vital.*

We should ask ourselves these questions:

How much freedom is there for comment, doubt, opinion and puzzlement – by children and teacher?

Who reads or listens to the children's language? Only the teacher? Does the teacher listen to *what* is being said or only to *how* it is being said?

For whom are the children writing? Whom do they have in mind as their audience when they write?

How is the children's work received? Does the response stimulate further efforts to express their thoughts in speech or writing – or do they 'play safe' and either stick to what they already know, or say as little as possible?

The teacher's intervention, correction and help is vital in fostering the language development of the children, but the main characteristics of a fostering attitude are acceptance and encouragement.

Acquiring language is an active and creative process

When planning and implementing a language program it is useful to bear in mind the natural process of language acquisition.

From their earliest days children seek to make sense of their world. From early infancy language in some form normally accompanies almost all other learning so that an intricate set of relationships forms between language and thinking, feeling and doing. Children develop power over their language and that very power contributes to their total growth and development. They grow into the language of their own community, absorbing the sound and voice patterns, the vocabulary, structures, meanings and values. So normal and unobtrusive is this process that it is easy to underestimate the complexity of the interacting factors involved and to fail to respond adequately to an individual child's language growth.

In babbling, which is the earliest form of talk, children practise the phonemes of the language. These come together to form their first recognisable words. They are content words – nouns, verbs, adjectives. These words are really sentences in which meaning is determined by the way and the circumstances in which children use them.

For example:

'DOG' can mean 'I want the dog.'

or

'The dog is here.'

or even

'The dog is not here.'

While drawing upon their abilities to imitate, children are active in making sense of utterances they have never heard

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2 How language competence grows

It is a fallacy to assume that if a teacher can break down language learning into little bits children make sense of them and put them together again, using 'the system'. The writers of the Bullock Report had this to say:

> The evidence is that one acquires language as a pattern, not as . . . a mechanical accumulation of abstract parts of speech. So we are not suggesting that the answer is to be found in . . . more comprehension extracts. We believe that language competence grows incrementally through an interaction of writing, talk, reading and experience, the body of resulting work forming an organic whole. But this does not mean it can be taken for granted, that the teacher does not exercise a conscious influence on the nature and quality of that growth.

In some classrooms language is already treated as an 'organic whole'. In others there is a fragmentary approach with different aspects of language learning being treated separately – grammar exercises one day, vocabulary extension the next, creative writing on another and so on.

It may be helpful to imagine language growth as an expanding spiral which develops more and more detail and refinement. This steady accumulation of language evolves both through a lively use of language in situations which interest and stimulate children and through the input of a variety of literature and other experiences relevant to their interests and needs.

Merely giving the learner facts about language, information about concepts of literature and advice about composition is not enough. Too often it happens that children:

- have control of the paragraph and the sentence yet have nothing to say;
- are so conscious of their spelling that avoiding words that they are unsure of seems the main task in writing; and
- know the definition of an adjective yet hate poetry.

It is not that spelling and paragraphing are trivial, but that they are not the most important prerequisites in learning to use language competently. Our first aim should be to ensure that children have the *confidence* and the *motivation* to use language in many forms, for a range of purposes and in different situations.

Experiences, both the ordinary, everyday ones and the more unusual, give children something to think about, talk about and write about.

In this transcript we can see how children's language grows out of their interest in what they are observing on the beach near their school:

Child 1: Look at the sand! There are holes in it and lots of lumps.
2: Crabs are in them . . . These crabs are like an army . . . They're orangy colours and . . . and they're in very large groups . . . and they cover a lot of the beach when the tide goes out.

At this point the teacher can encourage the children to develop their thinking and vocabulary by, for example, elaborating upon the simile of the 'army'. Do the crabs appear to *communicate* in any way? Do they work or in any way organise themselves in *formation?* Do they display *aggressive* behaviour? How would you describe the way they move? In the process of asking questions the teacher can take the opportunity to introduce new words or concepts *in context.*

Language grows out of our perception of events and situations and these perceptions in turn are affected by the language we use.

Language and personal growth

All aspects of a child's growth and development – social, emotional, physical, intellectual, moral and aesthetic – are inextricably intertwined. Language plays a most significant part of this development.

Children individually learn who they are and what is expected of them through the language that surrounds them in their daily activities and through the language that is directed to them personally. This applies particularly to language as it is used to control their behaviour in relation to others. For example, 'Don't bump the baby's head; 'Don't talk back to your mother'; 'Let Nanna get in first'; 'Say thank you'.

Not only do children learn who they are socially through talk, but their self-respect is encouraged or negated through the way language has been and is used to control them; they may be abused or humiliated through talk, or learn self-respect through praise and commendation.

Self-respect is the basis for developing sound relationships with others. Moral standards and values are established through respect between people and a recognition of the rights of others. For many children, particularly in their early years, the teacher represents the attitudes of society outside the home.

The establishment of moral concepts and values is affected by the interpretations set on situations by the teacher and others and the way language is used to express these views. Children's perceptions of their own direct experiences are modified by hearing the judgment and opinions of others. For example, when adults punish children and do not explain why, children are left to make what sense they can of the relationship between behaviour and punishment.

Caring relationships are important at all stages of a child's development.

Children, throughout their childhood, continue to need opportunities for acting-out and role-playing which will help them in developing a self-identity; they also need opportunities for art, music, drama and movement; all are essential to the growth of self and the development of language.

Young children learning language explore the sound patterns they hear and invent new ones. Where there is an atmosphere of love and emotional security, children are supported and encouraged by the adults around them. As a result, such children tend to use their language confidently and competently.

It is helpful to look at certain features of the relationship between a child and a caring adult in such a background. The main means of communicating is through talk and gesture. The talk does not happen in a vacuum, but is promoted by interests and mutual concerns, by experiences and observations. In the early years the adult will interpret the child's brief utterance, 'Johnny gone', and elaborate it to expand its meaning, for example, 'Yes dear, Johnny's gone to work'.

Improvising and experimenting increase as children become more sensitive to the sound, pattern and form of their language system. They may, for example, use 'foots' for 'feet', 'goed' for 'went', 'very fastly' for 'very quickly'. These are not mistakes but evidence of active exploration in which an over-generalisation of a newly-acquired pattern has been made.

If these over-generalisations are treated as mistakes the effect on the child may be a serious one, limiting active participation in language development. Corrections can be handled in a positive or negative way. The following examples illustrate this:

Bob: When John and me came to school today we seen a horse.
Miss S: Near the school, Bob? That must be the one Mrs Smith and I saw yesterday. I wonder who owns it?
Bob: Well, John said his Dad told him . . .

In this example the adult is showing that she is listening to what Bob is saying and she gives him a lead to continue the conversation. At the same time she models the appropriate forms in her reply. In the second example there is evidently no interest in *what* the child is trying to say, only in *how* it is being said; the adult's insensitive response can turn off the flow of language.

Tanya: Mum gived me twenty cents – it's for . . .
Mrs T: Gave, Tanya, not gived.
Tanya: Mum – she gived . . .
Mrs T: Tanya – gave!
Tanya: She gaved me this twenty cents for . . .
Mrs T: She gave you twenty cents, did she? Right oh – now sit down.

Children's language skills develop through talk with caring adults and family members in their normal day-to-day interactions. They learn through:

- their experience of using and hearing language;
- the expectation that language is used to make meaning; and
- their need to express emotions and ideas and to communicate with other people. It is this urge which motivates children to persist in their efforts to use language.

These observations have important implications for teaching:

- Talk is the primary mode of language.
- Talk is shaped by context.
- Caring adults search for the meaning in children's utterances; they support and elaborate the language children use to express their meaning.
- Caring adults respond positively to the child's success in using language however limited it seems.

James Britton says:

'How exploratory, how enterprising, a child is, will depend very much on how we treat his sallies into the unknown – not only in the beginning but throughout his schooling.'

A child is not an empty vessel when he enters school;
he comes replete with a set of abstractions about the world and himself,
some of which he may have acquired ready-made from others
but some of which he generated himself from his own experience.

James Moffett.

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3 Language, thought and feelings are interdependent

Language and thought

Where children are involved in discussions, reflecting on past events, predicting future happenings and imagining, they are acquiring the language for reasoning. Growth in their ability to observe and interpret what they see, feel and hear, to make comparisons and generalisations and to classify and order objects and events in their world, depends also on developing the appropriate language to formulate these concepts. Conversation and discussion with adults and other children, in all kinds of situations at home and at school, are essential if children are to develop the analytical skills associated with reasoning. Such skills enable them to reflect, predict and speculate, leading to experimentation and problem solving. The ability to think and reason in these important ways not only involves interaction with the environment, but also the development of language.

Through conversations with their teachers and classmates, and through exploration of the properties of objects and events, children begin to discover an element of sequence and form in what they observe. They begin to see relationships in time as well as more immediate causal connections. They can then apply the understanding thus gained to new situations and new experiences. School experiences should increase the opportunities for the kinds of problem solving, exploratory and investigatory activities that extend and enrich the ways language is used for thinking. Where the program is over teacher-directed, where the teacher makes all the decisions, where opportunities for choice are limited, where conversation and discussion are restricted, where answers to questions are only 'right' or 'wrong' and where only the teacher asks the questions, children's language development can be retarded and as a consequence their

ability to reason logically and to think imaginatively and creatively can be severely limited.

Language and imagination

A store of images

When children use their senses to explore their environment and to build up their store of images, their exploration takes the form of using one thing to represent another, that is, they make symbols, using their own bodies, objects and materials to represent their feelings and 'sensings' about the world. Through the fictions they hear, see and enjoy, they gain access to stores of images from our culture. It is through making and using symbols that they discover meanings in their world and represent what they understand to themselves and to others.

For instance they may represent 'aeroplane' to themselves by 'being' a plane, by using a few pieces of wood, by pretending to be the pilot, by making drawings and by making sounds. These representations or symbols will most often be accompanied by talking – to themselves and to others. As they see more aeroplanes, real and represented (i.e. on TV, in books, etc.) they will modify and elaborate their earlier symbols at the same time as they are modifying and extending their concept of 'planes'. As they make and use symbols, they discover differences and similarities in materials, objects, people and events. They select, modify and sequence their symbols and they begin to make new connections; as they do this, they order and re-order their mental images.

These images or perceptions are *forms of feeling*, not of thinking, but it is as children use these images that they think. *Percepts come before concepts* and it is to this image-store that we refer constantly as we think, talk, read or listen. We comprehend with these resources (Broudy, 1979). Children read with their imagination. Reading involves predicting or guessing the meaning; as they read, they gather information which either confirms or negates their predictions. Where the children's store of images is enriched they read with more understanding and enjoyment.

Nurturing the imagination

Imagining is *putting known items of reality together in new ways.* It involves examining possibilities, considering ideas and integrating arguments and descriptions given by others.

Children can be encouraged to build up scenes and events in their imagination and then represent them through language or other expressive media. Opportunity to use a wide range of symbol systems not only provides children with other avenues for expression of thoughts and ideas but underpins and enhances verbal skills.

Imaginative and dramatic play provide a powerful stimulus for language development. As children build up imagined contexts, reflect on what they are doing or the stories

they have heard, they explore the possibilities of language to serve the purpose of their play.

Image-making through the arts

Other forms of communication are essential for the development of language and expressiveness. Through these, our capacities for thought become articulated and refined.

We call these forms 'symbol systems' and they are the means whereby personal images or thoughts are transformed into public forms that can be shared with others. Not only do we express ideas through the symbol systems of visual arts, music, mathematics, drama and dance, we also learn about our world through them. As we use each one, we have different perceptions of the world; we make and find new meanings.

It has been suggested that there is a sequence of development in symbolic learning, that through bodily movement children become aware of themselves as three-dimensional objects in space. This leads to further development in making and using three-dimensional objects and this in turn helps children to recognise and produce two-dimensional representations. These representations, such as drawings, are the necessary precursors of reading and writing. Similarly, sound and music perception are necessary precursors of words and language. These stages do not drop away as the next stage is reached, but must continue to develop alongside the skills of language.

All our symbol systems develop from the two main streams of movement and sound; drama develops from children's games and 'pretends' and from their exploration of movement. Music and poetry have their roots in children's singing and chanting and in their exploration of sound. The visual arts develop from their early scribbling and drawing. Image-making through the arts is not an activity children outgrow after infant or primary school; it should continue to enrich their thinking and provide opportunities for creative action throughout their schooling.

In our society, words are the major currency for communicating meaning for ourselves. The effectiveness of our verbal language is enhanced by the harmonious development of the non-verbal media of music, movement, the visual arts and drama. The arts play an important role in shaping and modifying children's relationships with the people and objects of their world. They also provide them with opportunities to find meaning and to give form to their emotional reactions and feelings. With many individuals, thought is first given an external form through the intuitive modes of expression such as movement, painting or construction and only subsequently through words.

We need to understand that the arts are basic necessities, not expendable extras, and therefore we need to provide adequate time, materials and perceptive guidance to allow for development of these non-verbal modes of expression.

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4 The child's language development depends on our response

We must accept children and their language

Children bring many kinds of language to school. We build upon the language of children, the language they use to describe their experiences, the language they have grown up with, the language which is part of them. To reject their language is to reject them; we cannot wipe out all previous experience of language and hope to put another kind in its place. Thinking in deficit terms may blind us to the strengths that children already have. Quite often we are unconsciously influenced by the appearance, speech and behaviour of the children we teach, which leads us to make inaccurate estimates of the children's potential. We need to realise how potently our expectations of children affect their self-image and performance. These attitudes and expectations are communicated in various subtle ways and can either help or harm children's self-images. Children who feel confident they can succeed, will try and will continue to learn, whereas children who feel that they

can't succeed, will give up easily, or even be afraid to try – afraid they will fail again. Once this has happened, they are affected in every area of their lives.

Expectations are often the link between how children see themselves and how well or how badly they do at school. Children live up or down to their teacher's expectations. If, for instance, children are slow in learning to read and if they tend to be unco-operative, these labels 'slow' and 'unco-operative' may become the expectations teachers hold for them as they continue through school. In fact, children may learn that this behaviour gains attention, and so develop a pattern of behaviour that may continue throughout school life.

The language children bring to school has been acquired in response to objects, events, people and fictions of all kinds, in their environment.

The language that children bring to school and that they continue to accumulate in response to their experiences outside school must be accepted – it cannot be ignored – and we have to acknowledge the value and significance of their out-of-school experiences, and to realise that they are worth talking and writing about. Knowing about some of these experiences enables teachers to relate previous experiences to new ones, to help children to recall past experiences and to encourage them to find the language to do so.

The books and pictures in the classroom signal acceptance or rejection of certain kinds of backgrounds. Children whose home backgrounds differ from those of the middle class people and situations portrayed in many school readers and story books will need books and pictures depicting people and situations like their own.

Children who never meet people like themselves in books and stories will feel alienated and will often respond by rejecting all that school and books have to offer.

Leila Berg (1977, p.75) had this to say about the books often given to children:

> What is it they are given? They are given readers about a family that lives in a detached house . . . Labrador dog . . . Siamese cat . . . beautiful white damask tablecloth, tea always poured from a graciously sitting position . . . children who say 'Good morning, mother' . . . a family who never never has to clock on. If anything could completely confirm for this child what he has already dimly suspected through his growing five years – that he and his family and friends and his street are worthless and expendable – it is the orthodox school reader. As far as they are concerned, he does not exist.

Ethnic backgrounds

Children from differing ethnic backgrounds, whose mother-tongue is not English have learned their own language within the context of their family and culture. Acceptance of the children's mother-tongue is essential as rejection may seriously affect their concept of self, parents and culture. If we can help them to establish their self-identity within the context of their first language and become familiar with that culture and its values before learning a

second language we may help to prevent a breakdown in original identity and family communications.

Children whose home language is not English, often spend the greater part of their school day talking and thinking in the language of their parents. They will require opportunities to communicate thoughts and feelings and to express ideas in a way that others understand. It is logical for instance to allow groups of children of the same ethnic background within a school, to meet often and work together so that communications can be made in the mother-tongue. Practical situations related to first-hand experiences, if shared by all, lead the non-English speaking children, their teachers and the other children towards mutual learning and understanding.

Where possible, the language program should enable children to use their own language for thinking, problem solving and skill acquisition as well as becoming functional in English.

Start from where the child is. We must be willing to accept the child as he is.

There seems to be a serious confusion underlying these statements and the questions which they raise. No one doubts that there are various standards that apply in learning any language. These standards will vary in terms of time and place, and the purpose of the speakers involved. Standards are best investigated in relation to appropriateness rather than to any fixed or absolute criteria.

Start from where the child is does not imply *stay where the child is.* What is being stressed is the fact that no child comes to school without language or without experience.

For many children the language the school uses and requires is vastly different from that of the home.

The implications of 'acceptance' are:

- the role played by adults in children's learning is crucial, as children are readily motivated by adult approval;

- teachers should have a genuine concern for each child's well-being, and need to develop skills of appraisal to understand where each child is, in order to help that child move forward;
- rejection of a child's language implies rejection of the child and may trigger off rejection of school and all it represents; and
- trust and mutual respect between child and adult are vital for effective learning.

The media and language

Much has been written about the influence of television on children's thinking and development, but many adults still tend to underestimate the effect of television on children's language development. The choice of programs on television is limited and many children are exposed to superficial and sensational, if not actually harmful programs. It is essential that television programs are discussed so that children are encouraged to be more critical of what they see on television. The positive and negative aspects of television need to be considered in any language program. The negative aspects can be countered by introducing children to other sources of vicarious experiences such as books, films and live theatre.

Language occurs in a context

Language is shaped and modified by the speaker's or writer's perceptions and interpretations of the context. What we do, where we are, the people we meet, all influence the language we use. We adapt our language to accommodate the people who surround us and to meet the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

The ability to shift from one kind of language (or 'register') to another is construed as appropriate social behaviour; being able to make these shifts results from our experience of different kinds of situations demanding different kinds of behaviour.

Language is:
- about something – it has content, subject matter;
- by someone – speaker, writer;
- to someone – listener, reader, audience; and
- for a purpose.

Language is further modified by:
- the particular situation – context;
- the relationship between the speaker or writer and the audience;
- the speaker's perceptions of this relationship and the extent of common ground, for example, shared experience, culture, knowledge; and
- the speaker's perception of the nature of the occasion, for example, the degree of formality perceived to be appropriate.

The exact relationship and interaction of these factors is most complex and varied. We learn to adjust our language, not because we have been given lessons in how to do so,

but through our normal interactions and encounters.

Children whose language is situation-bound need opportunities at school to talk and listen to a variety of people, adults and children, familiar and unfamiliar; they need these opportunities in order to make their meanings more explicit and to vary their language use. For instance, they may not be familiar with:

- speculative or predictive modes such as 'What might happen if . . .? , 'Perhaps we might . . .', 'Suppose . . .';
- the language of cause and effect involving 'because', 'unless', 'whenever';
- the language of time sequencing – 'when', 'then'.

Some children may understand the concept of cause and effect and be able to predict and speculate about events but may not use conventional means to express these ideas; other children may be able to say the words but may not have a full understanding of the concepts. It can be misleading to judge children's intellectual development solely on the basis of their ability to respond to the language of an adult.

They may be expected to use or understand language for purposes they normally do not express, or have not heard expressed, in contexts they have never met before. In learning their language they have come to cope with a certain range of meanings, but at school another range of meanings is required. Some of them are then likely to find what is taught in school irrelevant to them; the school is not talking to them about what they know.

This matter is not only of concern to teachers of young children; every time children of any age meet new areas of knowledge and skill, the question of language use arises.

Children learn language in contexts that are lively and relevant to them.

When children become involved in their experiences, when their interest and curiosity are stimulated, they will seek help to further their understanding. In some schools exciting development of language is taking place

as teachers and children use opportunities to talk and write in meaningful contexts.

In the following example three eleven-year-olds have been making a plan of some buildings. They are discussing their experiences with an adult.

Paul: Well, uh, one of us was pacing around the buildings, measuring the buildings by the paces and one of us tag along to find out how many paces, uh, he measured for the building and the other bloke who tagged along behind the recorder was the bloke who checked the corners to see that they were right angles, with a compass.

Adult: What does 'scale' mean? (long pause)

Paul: It's a kind of a ratio . . .

Leigh: It's a key, sort of thing . . .

Paul: From, say one to, ah, one to five say – one foot to, ah, five kilometres or something . . .

Adult: Yes that's a ratio; but you said it's a kind of key, didn't you?

Leigh: Yes.

Adult: What do you mean by that?

Leigh: It tells you what . . . ah, on the map it tells you what reality it is . . . in reality . . . if you didn't have a key or a scale, well you'd, ah, you wouldn't know what size it was.

Stephen: When you blow up the thing . . .

Leigh: You'd just have to draw eight paces long . . .

Paul: You'd just have the outline – and you'd say, ah, you know, that could be five kilometres wide, that wall you know, and three centimetres that side, you couldn't very well tell. You have to have scale to work it out mathematically; so it you know, fits in.

Adult: So that is what?

Paul: So it fits in, everything fits in a place so it works out perfectly. You'd have to reduce it . . . it's like a reducing . . . scale reduces things.

Adult: But it could increase things, though, couldn't it?

Paul: Yes. Scale's . . . scale's like a, ah, magnifying glass; it all depends on which way you point it.

Adult: A magnifying glass?

Stephen: A pair of binoculars, you could say 'cause you look through this end you make them small. Look through that end, the right way up and make them large.

The children have difficulty explaining clearly what they did and how they did it though they know in their own minds what they were about. As the transcript progresses, their understanding of 'scale' seems to grow and in fact catches alight when they find familiar words and images that help explain the unfamiliar.

By making explicit what they have understood they are able to make connections and see the gaps in their understanding. Some children's inability to make meaning

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explicit can become a barrier to success at school. The need and desire to make meaning explicit depends on the context. The less experience we hold in common, the more explicit our language needs to be.

In one school, as a result of interest generated by a unit of work on local government and a visit to the local council chambers, a group of children wanted to know what the National Trust could do to help people whose houses (100 years old or more) were to be pulled down. With the teacher's help and guidance they wrote to the National Trust to ask for information. The writing of such a letter by a group involved:

- discussions with the teacher and with each other;
- writing a first draft together;
- instruction by the teacher about formal language including forms of address, setting out of addresses and formal endings;
- redrafts and corrections, checking on spelling; and
- rewriting the letter in its final form.

These children learned, among other things, how to write a business letter by preparing an actual letter which was sent out and which elicited a reply.

Compared with this approach, the practice exercises which abound in many text books on learning English are sterile and time-wasting. Frequently, they instil time-worn phrases that deaden children's language use. A similar criticism applies to stencilled sheets of exercises on aspects of language. It has been shown repeatedly that such exercises are an ineffective means of improving accuracy or of developing ability in written expression.

'One cannot learn to use language efficiently by drills: text book boredom dries up the springs of expression, and those of perception and thought with them' (Holbrook, 1964).

While children are using language and learning through it, teachers who are sensitive to children and language will guide them to discover how language works.

Children should be given help and support in developing appropriate language as the need arises and within contexts that are relevant to them at the time. When helping them our concern should be with the appropriateness of language rather than with absolute standards of 'good' or 'bad'.

Whether language is appropriate or not depends on where, why, and to whom it is being used.

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5 Growth of understanding

In fostering children's growth and development there are two major sources of learning, both of which are necessary because they balance, modify and extend one another. These are children's own experiences and those they enter vicariously through the world of literature. Many parents and teachers understand the principle instinctively and give children opportunities to meet and enjoy the world of books, as well as encouraging their first-hand exploration and experience of the world around them.

The act of sharing stories and poems with children of all ages, creates unique bonds of empathy and understanding between tellers or readers and listeners; it provides opportunities for shared enjoyment and reflection as well as speculation and discussion. Children's early and continued encounters with literature are vital to their language growth and development.

Some stories and poems may provoke discussion, others

may better be left to grow privately in the imagination. Often the discussion that accompanies a story or poem can lead children to explore and reflect on their own experience more fully. Sometimes the teacher may focus on the sequence of events within the story and encourage the children in skills of logical reasoning; at other times the teacher may help children to enter into the imaginary world of the story and into the feelings and reactions of the characters or even to speculate about possible outcomes. As children begin to appreciate differing points of view, to consider the circumstances and attitudes of others, they grow in their capacity to make sense of the world.

The early years of children's lives are the ones which shape their life-long language use and attitudes. The school plays a vital part in this development. As teachers reflect on the ideas in this statement they may modify and extend the theoretical framework upon which they base their practice. As they observe children using language, they may bring new sets of questions to their planning. These questions grow out of their understanding of language and their observation of children. As they seek answers, teachers will be led into wider reading of the literature on language, into meeting challenges of planning and organisation and into a deeper understanding of the role of language in life.